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ABSTRACT

The IowaLink Program at the University of Iowa is a two-semester, academic support program for recruited students. The program provides an extended academic transition between high school and college for students who have demonstrated the potential to succeed at Iowa but who do not meet standards for regular admission. One of the features of the program is a course called Academic Seminar--Academic Seminar I and II is a course sequence designed specifically for the Iowa Link Program which introduces students to the university's academic culture, using an ethnographic, activity-oriented approach. The course carries a reading and writing component equivalent to that of a freshman composition course. In this paper the author/educator discusses the course, which she has been teaching for 3 years. While the developmental aspect of IowaLink stresses the cognitive and affective development of students, the paper argues that providing this kind of learning opportunity by itself will severely shortchange the students. It maintains that skills and cognition are the "phonics" of academic discourse in courses such as Academic Seminar. The paper suggests a two-fold approach: the use of cognitive and affective strategies within a critical literacy framework. It provides a detailed example of the establishment of a practice of critical literacy with the delineation of an education autobiography writing assignment students must complete as their first investigation. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Skills and Cognition: The "Phonics" of Academic Literacy?

by Bonnie K. Sonnek

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PANEL TITLE: Students Reading the University: Critical Discourse Analysis of/as Academic Literacy

PRESENTATION TITLE: Skills and Cognition: The "Phonics" of Academic Literacy?

INTRODUCTION:

Good afternoon! In my talk today, I will demonstrate to you how I have attempted to continue to include a skills and cognition approach within a larger, more complex critical literacy environment in a freshman class I teach.

The IowaLink Program at the University of Iowa is a two-semester, academic support program for recruited students. The program provides an extended academic transition between high school and college for students who have demonstrated the potential to succeed at the University, but who do not meet standards for regular admission.

One of the features of the program is a course I will be talking about today: Academic Seminar. Academic Seminar I and II is a course sequence designed specifically for the IowaLink Program and introduces students to the academic culture of the University using an ethnographic, activity-oriented approach. Students examine their own strengths and use these strengths to develop college level critical thinking and study skills. The course carries a reading and writing component equivalent to that of a freshman composition course; however, the substantive focus of the class is to help students better understand the university environment.

Ok, now that's what the marketing materials and brochures say! I will try to explain what we are doing and how we are doing what we are doing.

I have to say that when I began teaching this course three years ago, I brought to the job a Master's degree in Developmental Education, so I felt fairly comfortable preparing my first syllabus for the course, which included months and months of study skills, reading strategies, writing strategies, test taking strategies and more strategies and more strategies. From my previous work in the area of developmental education, I was aware that skills transfer best if taught using books and writing from other courses students are taking at the same time. So, I did some of that--and moved on my merry way.

While the developmental aspect of IALINK stresses the cognitive and affective development of students, I would like to argue that providing this kind of learning opportunity by itself will severely shortchange our students. I will argue that this is needed in a program such as ours, but also that alone it cannot provide what students need to "read the university." After all, my students were not all Iowa farm boys and girls--though I did exchange some great plowing-late-at-night-stories with a few(!),--but what about those students more familiar with other discourses--those different than my own? I couldn't seem to get away from the ideas of multiple discourses and how important that must be for the work I am doing with my students, yet I still maintain that skills and cognition are the phonics of academic discourse in courses such as the one I am discussing. Therefore, my presentation will include a two-fold approach: the use of cognitive and affective strategies within a critical literacy framework.

My first attempt at trying to establish a practice of critical literacy in my course begins as I examine the Education Autobiography writing assignment I have students complete as their first investigation. I should add here that students complete three investigations during their first semester. These include the education autobiography, a meet the professor investigation and a university/community critique as the third investigation. So, I do need to say that we examine university discourses, but I had no real understanding of exactly what I was trying to do when I found the discourse!

First of all, I would like to recommend two resources for anyone needing to add more voices to your classroom. My favorites thus far have been Ira Shor and Caroline Pari's *Critical Literacy in Action* and Wendy Morgan's *Critical Literacy in the Classroom*, both of which I have listed on the handout I gave to you, and both of which allow me to integrate my study skills and reading and writing strategies work.

To begin my task, I evaluated my assignment to see what I had missed. To do this, I had to find some key concepts in critical literacy that I thought should be included in this course. I had my ideas, you realize, but I needed something concrete! For this, I returned to Shor's book and this is some of what I found:

TRANSPARENCY #1

Critical literacy is. . .

- An attitude toward history that sees language as symbolic action. (Kenneth Burke)
- A dream of a new society against the power now in power. (Paulo Freire)
- An insurrection of subjugated knowledges. (Michel Foucault)

- A counterhegemonic structure of feeling. (Raymond Williams)
- A multicultural resistance invented on the borders of identities. (Gloria Anzaldua)
- Language used against fitting unexceptionably into the status quo. (Adrienne Rich)

Sounds easy, right?! Well, on to the next page...

Actually, my favorite definitions by Shor are not even a statements but questions: **(TRANSPARENCY #2)**

"How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter?"

"If language helps make us, how can we use and teach oppositional discourse so as to remake ourselves and our culture?"

Ira Shor in *Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds* argues that "No pedagogy is neutral; no learning process is value-free, and no curriculum avoids ideology and power relations." I realized then that my assignment assumed somewhat of a neutral, value-free, ideology-free stance, or so I thought!

To begin our unit, I was having students read essays and excerpts on education, class and culture. Some of these included Malcolm X's "Learning to Read," Eudora Welty's "Clamorous to Learn," and a film from the American Experience Series about Richard Pratt's assimilation of Indians into the white man's world, titled "In the White Man's Image." Then I give students a preliminary writing handout in which they discuss

and write about learning experiences they have had both in school and out of school. Then, they write their papers, and I wonder why they are so shallow!

As I look back on the discussions we have had since they wrote their autobiographies, I realize we missed "the good stuff," the real stuff from whence critical literacy flows.

Let me give you an example. After I had spent several evenings reading Shor's *Critical Literacy in Action*, I remembered a discussion that had BEGUN in class one morning and how I could have done so much with it. I thought about Shor's idea that a critical writing class is a zone where teachers invite students to move into deeper examinations of knowledge in its global contexts (Shor, p. 12). That sounds easy enough, right? Shor explains that his definition of critical literacy takes Vygotsky's zone of proximal development a step further in that critical literacy reconstructs and develops ALL parties involved (not just the students, but also the teachers) and secondly, that dissident politics is foregrounded, which then invites democratic relations in class and democratic action outside the class.

Shor emphasizes that ALL PARTICIPANTS (teachers and students) become redeveloped as democratic agents and social critics, and that critical teaching is not a one-way development, nor something done TO STUDENTS. He argues that by inviting students to develop critical thought and action, the educator develops as a critical-democratic educator who becomes more informed of the needs, conditions, speech habits, and perception of the students, from which knowledge she designs activities and integrates her special expertise. In other words, this action constructs students as

authorities, agents and unofficial teachers who educate the teacher and each other--and whom she educates. Shor calls this ethic of mutual development a "Freierean addition to the Vygotskian zone."

So, with this is mind, I thought back to a recent discussion we had in class one morning after I had returned their education autobiographies to them. I asked students about their first visits to their homes after being at the University of Iowa for about two months, since I knew most of them had now spent at least one weekend visiting their families and friends. I realized now, thinking back, that I had asked them questions for their autobiographies that I would want to answer. I could describe some past educational experiences that meant a great deal to me--and that is what I thought about when I assigned the essay. What I failed to see was the warning Shor gives, which is "Do not walk gently in that status quo," but take alternative roads for development. My question to students that morning included an alternative route: I asked them to tell me what it meant to return to their homes after two months at a Big Ten University. For many students this meant returning not only to the Iowa farms, but to Miami, Detroit and Atlanta. I realize now that I was asking them to tell me about their experiences--not telling them to outline their experiences using MY outline, but their own. Remember, I wanted to find out how their educational experiences were affecting THEM, so, I simply asked them--novel idea, huh?!

Several students shared how different their parents now seemed--more or less strict, more or less educated/smart/closed-minded. Some talked about how much flak they received for sitting down in the living room and opening a book. In fact, the act for

some proved quite embarrassing; one said he wouldn't open a book because that would be too weird in his house; some talked about how different the attitudes seemed, or the slang that was used, or the way siblings were treated by each other. A young man, whom I will call Simon, sat back in the corner with his head down. His head is always down during class except when I call on him to answer a question, which he is almost always able to do. He looked up and said it was weird for him. "I hated it," he said, and continued to tell us about how he went to a local university campus on Friday because he couldn't stand being at his house any longer. He said he then spent most of the weekend on campus and only went home in the evenings to sleep. My friends weren't people I wanted to hang around with, he told us, so he hung out at a place where he now felt comfortable. "I never would'a believed it a year ago," he said, looking back down.

Other students began to ask him questions and to identify with him. One young woman turned to him and blurted out that she had gone to a library because that felt comfortable for her, and that she hadn't even BEEN to a library until she came to the University. "Man," she said, "I feel like a real nerd, but it just felt good." Of course I didn't tell anyone where I was, she added rather sheepishly.

The conversations continued along these lines until I began what I thought was my "real work" of teaching.

As I think about Simon's response, Shor's words haunt me. What a perfect opportunity I had missed. I had wondered as I sat in so many of my own classes how critical literacy actually "looked" in the classroom, and yet when it moved around in my

classroom, I failed to see it.

Wendy Morgan says in her book, *Critical Literacy in the Classroom*, that if we do not attend closely to what students already know and think about culture and language, power and possibility; if we cannot imaginatively sense how they 'perform' or produce themselves in that culture--then we are not likely to work to make bridges of learning between their understanding and ours. And, she continues, then we may not be able to work with their knowledge and desires, the investments they have made in the culture of their world, towards helping make them even more "right."

I realize now that I missed that opportunity with my students. I needed to ask them about the status quo, about their cultures and what those cultures do with education--the discussion opened up many avenues, and I knew I had some work ahead of me in revamping upcoming essay assignments. As a general guideline, I am following Morgan's use of discourse, which includes four main points:

TRANSPARENCY #3

1. Discourses make up (or constitute) and are made up of social practices and institutions.
2. Discourses converse or argue with one another.
3. Discourses do political work (Ideologies organize the ideas, beliefs, practices, thoughts and attitudes of a group).
4. Discourses constitute the objects spoken and written about and the speaking and writing subjects AND the sense of self-subjectivity.

Morgan, p. 2.

Since much of Shor's text is a tribute to the teachings of Paulo Freire, I would like to share one of my favorite quotes from *Paulo Freire on Higher Education*, in which

he talks about the "here" of our students and says the following (which seems so appropriate for what I am doing):

TRANSPARENCY #4

> One of our greatest mistakes as educators and politicians is not perceiving that our 'here' is the student's and the people's 'there.' Of course there are exceptions! There are professors who are 'here, and it is not yet even the student's 'here'; this happens because we forget our 'here' of before, and we forget that any 'there' implies movement, and that any movement contains 'historicity.'(p. 55).

Shor also reminds us that critical literacy has to develop mutual inquiry in a field already crowded with anticritical monologue--that the student-teacher dichotomy has to be reconciled.

For more detailed assistance on how to revise my education autobiography, I examined Kathleen McCormick's *Reading our Histories, Understanding our Cultures* and a chapter written by Elsa Auerbach (in Shor's book), titled "Teacher, Tell Me What to Do."

Auerbach uses a participatory approach to literacy instruction, and while it is designed for ESL students, the guidelines provided some direction for me and what I was trying to accomplish. She believes that the starting point for curriculum development has to be an understanding of students' lives--their backgrounds, personal histories, strengths, and current situations. Furthermore, she believes

teachers must understand the contextual factors that shape our students' literacy acquisition. This seemed like it pertained to my IALINK students with such diverse backgrounds, and so I examined and later used her guiding principles for participatory literacy instruction, which include the following:

TRANSPARENCY #5

1. Start with learners' needs and interests.
2. Involve learners in determining the content of the instruction.
3. Focus on meaning, not mechanics.
4. Contextualize work on form (connect form to function and meaning).
5. Encourage dialogue and critical analysis of social realities.
6. Use a variety of participatory tools to explore themes.
7. Move toward action outside the classroom.
8. Involve students in evaluation. (Shor, p. 31).

As I said, I used these as guidelines to provide direction--you may or may not find them helpful in your own work.

Next, I reread the first chapter in McCormick's book, in which she and Charles Lipka talk about students locating themselves in history and culture. They take the reader through a sequence of assignments, which are designed to develop a student's understanding of a personal conflict, by analyzing it both historically and culturally. In each part of the sequence, they direct students to write something new, but also to go back and--using insights from instructors, fellow

students, and their own writing as they produce it--to rethink and revise an earlier part of their work.

As I examined their methodology, I realized that my own assignment lacked movement; hers contained movement and growth potential. I liked it. First of all, I will show you her major points and then explain how I used them for my own purposes. Her assignment sequence is as follows (p. 13):

TRANSPARENCY #6

1. Personal conflict narrative (choose a conflict about which you have changed your mind);
2. Analysis of multiple perspectives at the time of the conflict (cultural analysis);
3. Analysis of changing perspective on the conflict over time (historical analysis);
4. Analysis of the conflict and your change over time in relation to other students in your class (optional synthetic analysis);
5. Final paper--rethinking, revising, and putting it all together (combining cultural and historical analysis).

The sequence of my education autobiography assignment as revised looks like this (this does not include all preliminary writings, etc.):

HANDOUT:

1. Write a narrative of a learning experience you have had about which you have changed your mind. Include as many details as you can to show your reader

what the place looked like, felt like, smelled like, etc. Place yourself back into the experience during the time it happened and describe your perspective at the time of the experience.

2. Analyze multiple perspectives at the time of the experience--you, your teacher, parent, guardian, others involved, etc. (cultural analysis).
3. Analyze your changing perspective on the experience over time (historical analysis).
4. Analyze the experience and your change over time in relation to other students in your class (optional synthetic analysis).
5. Write final paper (combining cultural and historical analyses).

As McCormick and Lipka suggest, the following six critical questions can be used as students write their own drafts or edit other students' drafts.

ALSO ON HANDOUT:

1. What is the author's learning experience? Can you describe it?
2. What is the author's perspective at the time of the experience? How did he/she feel about what was happening?
3. Why did the author have the perspective he/she had at the time of the experience? (This will include a study of the larger factors involved in the experience, such as dominant beliefs, expectations, assumptions--the CULTURAL beliefs).
4. Why do different perspectives exist at the time of the incident/experience? (This will include a discussion of subjectivities--who has the power, etc.).

5. How did the author change his/her perspective from the time of the experience until today?

6. Why does the author's perspective change over time? (This will include an examination of values, attitudes and beliefs that have changed from the time the author experienced the event until today.)

McCormick, p. 22

Along with McCormick's sequence, I also found helpful Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones": social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, as used by Shor. Pratt suggests two alternatives to explore difference and resist dominant culture, the autoethnography and transculturation. Autoethnography is a text in which students describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them, which seems to apply to my students' education autobiographies. Transculturation is the process in which members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent materials transmitted by a dominant culture. Pratt's contact zone approach has been developed for writing classes by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Shor, p. 20), and Shor combines its use with one of his definitions of critical literacy.

TRANSPARENCY #7

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional cliches, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social

context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.

(Shor 1992, 129)

I have to admit that after my journey with Shor, Morgan, Freire and others, I re-examined some basic tenets in the field of developmental education. I still was bothered that the field didn't seem to promote critical literacy in its agenda. Again, I was humbled.

The National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) recently published *The Expanding Role of Developmental Education* (Higbee and Dwinell, Eds.), a monograph in which authors discuss new and upcoming changes in the field. NADE definitions and goals adopted in 1995 state that developmental education promotes the cognitive and affective growth of all postsecondary learners, at all levels of the learning continuum. In "Toward a Theory of Developmental Education: The Centrality of Discourse," (an essay contained in the monograph), Lundell and Collins argue educators have identified the need and demanded recognition for programmatic models that *assist students in their educational transitions, especially students whose backgrounds may not include experiences and discourses valued in higher education.* It may not be Shor's definition, but I was relieved to know that the field was including some semblance of critical literacy. The working definition for developmental education includes the following:

TRANSPARENCY #8

1) A holistic focus on cognitive and affective development of students,

2) Acknowledges a spectrum of learning styles and needs, and

3) Promotes an interdisciplinary range of approaches and student services.

And wouldn't you know it, as I turned to the latest issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing*, I found an article by Ira Shor, who is now proclaiming that basic writing actually would be better mainstreamed into regular composition with provisions made for the tutorial needs of students! He argues that a Basic Writing empire has been created and driven by bogus testing and prejudice. He proposes this first-year college writing course should evolve into what he calls "Critical Literacy Across the Community." (Shor, p. 100). Example of woman born and educated in Africa/woman born and educated in America. These women were guilty of "illegal literacy."

My goal is to re-imagine each of our investigations using a critical approach. Then, I may even decide to tackle the theory and practice of assessment of students' performances and products in critical literacy classrooms. Maybe next year!

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